

Once upon a time—okay, in the early '80s—there was little overlap between punk and hard rock. Swaggering guitar solos and macho vocals were off-limits for anyone following in the footsteps of the Sex Pistols.

Then came The Cult.

Led by vocalist Ian Astbury and guitarist Billy Duffy, the British band embraced big '70s rock when it was seriously out of style. It proved a successful strategy—several Cult albums became worldwide bestsellers, particularly 1987's *Electric* and 1989's *Sonic Temple*.

In recent years, The Cult has been an on/off venture. While the band was dormant, Duffy pursued such side projects as *Cardboard Vampyres* and *Circus Diablo*. But now The Cult is most definitely on—we spoke to Duffy moments before he left his LA home for a UK Cult tour. He discussed the band's 25-year history and his renewed enthusiasm for acoustic guitar.

BILLY DUFFY'S ACOUSTIC CULT

You embraced big '70s rock before it was fashionable.

Yes. It was very, very, very unfashionable to say we liked Led Zeppelin. I wish I could say we were clever enough to have a grand design in doing so, but it was just an honest, genuine evolution for us.

Did you start out playing that style?

Absolutely. I was a rock guitar wannabe kid. I was into Free, Thin Lizzy, and other '70s rock. That was true of most of the original punk guitarists as well. Steve Jones from the Sex Pistols, the guys in The Clash, the guys in Generation X—they were all into The Stooges and '70s rock. That's what came out in The Cult. Ian liked the fact that I could play rock things. In the end, he's really a classic blues-rock singer, and I'm a meat-and-potatoes guitarist. We were part of the post-punk Gothic scene at first, but we eventually realized that that style really belonged more to bands like Bauhaus.

Did you play much acoustic guitar as a kid?

I did. But then punk happened, and that changed everything in England. My high school band became completely polarized. Half the guys wanted to do folk-rock like Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, and half got into punk. That included me—I saw the Sex Pistols right at that impressionable age, and I got into the energy and

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immediacy of it all. For the first time, I thought I could actually be in a real band. Before that, I'd only aspired to be a roadie for a band! So I turned my back on acoustic for a while.

But you came back to it. It's a big part of the sound on "She Sells Sanctuary," The Cult's first big hit.

Actually, that acoustic guitar was recorded as a last-minute overdub. The producer wanted something on the chorus to accent the turnaround. I thought of it as a big Bo Diddley or Eddie Cochran hook.

There are lots of cool overdubs like that on the early Cult records. You were always layering, doubling and filtering your guitars.

Yes. I was always into sonics and soundscapes. Frankly, it was because I didn't have the physical dexterity to do anything else! That was true of a lot of the post-punk players. Edge from U2, Will Sergeant from Echo & the Bunnymen, John McGeogh from Siouxsie and the Banshees—none of us were great technicians, but we were all hell-bent on creating our own little

sonic space. I think The Cult lost a little something when we moved away from that spatial sound in order to sound chunkier.

Nowadays you're playing a great deal of acoustic.

Yes. I've got several Yamaha guitars. I use a jumbo acoustic CJX32 onstage every night with The Cult during our acoustic segment. I also got a parlor-sized guitar and a jumbo cutaway, which is handy if I have to play some of those long, droning runs up the neck. They're fantastic guitars. They're honest-sounding. They're not too shrill or trebly. They stay in tune. They sound good out front at the shows—very rich and clear. And they're not stupid looking—they're plain and honest, which is what I like in a guitar. I'm very happy. Yamaha is giving me a lot of love.

You also did some acoustic shows with Jerry Cantrell from Alice in Chains.

Yes. We did a band called the Cardboard Vampyres. I have a lot of respect for Jerry. Like Jerry points out, we're both self-taught, meat-and-potatoes players at heart. We both have an